

M E D U S A

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M E D U S A

John Fraser



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*'And may pure reason rather than experience
persuade, that the universe can collapse,
borne down with a frightful-sounding crash.'*

Lucretius, De rerum natura, V.

*'Cette chose nous l'avons voulue. Nous l'accomplissons. Nous
marchons vers le but armés de tous ces jours d'attente, de tous ce
qui fermenta en nous depuis notre naissance.*

Aujourd'hui, joie: elle s'épanouit, elle fleurit sous mes pas ...'

Smara. Carnets de voyage de Michel Vieuchange.
Publiés par Jean Vieuchange. Plon. Paris, 1932.

Foreword

MEDUSA was one of the three Gorgon sisters, the only mortal one, whose looks turned people to stone. She was seduced by Neptune the sea god, in the temple of Minerva, goddess of war. Later, Perseus decapitated her, and put her head on the shield of Minerva, which he had borrowed. Blood from the head, now covered with snakes, dripped to produce the snakes of Africa. It retained its power to turn the onlooker to stone.

Medusa was the name of the French ship, whose wreck was celebrated in the famous, scandalous picture by Géricault, as the raft, bearing crew members and passengers, was left by the officers to drift for thirteen days while they fled in the ship's boats.

M E D U S A I



1 Disaster

SO, EVIL strikes again, I say, and laugh.
People, a beautiful carpet, cover this terra
cotta plain.

The headcloths, tribalised. Fine liveried goats in black and brown and white. A touch of heavenly blue – that’s plastic – all now composed and just a-buzz, still as a carpet from Shiraz that barely stirs with little animals and runes.

Don’t let the secret out.

Uselessly, I ask my friend – friend I should bring to justice, or more likely, shove justice in his face, ‘What was this – catastrophe? Earthquake again? Or politics? Identity wars? Or grazing grounds? Or just because it’s goddam hot,’ that brings this press of people here, shucked from their homes and business. And so I think of drinks, cool bars.

Now, we shall start to pack these guys and gals

– here, some are dying, some will soon, and some will wish they were – squared off in tents. Neat.

History will start all over; these will become the hunters, gatherers, and we the fractious gods like Jupiters, assuaging our desires and few of theirs – with showers of coins or flights of swans. Then, let us unpack our boxes – our trove of things incongruous. That’s civilisation. Speeded up and started over. Warriors first, then farmers, later – lawyers. Catastrophe and after – and we are the guys who patch it over, tweak the mechanism – off they go again. Everybody!

We fix disasters.

Let’s suppose – the airship, squats down on the river, an immense donut. Tiny bodies falling from the sides, as finally, with foam and fire, it hits the grey-green water. Cars stop to watch – the thing should float, must have been planned like that, but no, it sinks, small citizens are drowning in their private drama. Here’s a tired helicopter bringing journalists, some leap in with cameras and such.

It’s so quiet, so peaceful.

Medusa



Now, I've nothing better to do. Back in town, I ask the trainman, 'What line is this? I shouldn't have come with you.'

'Eighty', he says, behind the partition where he's received his guests, ingratiating – 'Ah, Geometer this, Engineer that.'

The train is nearly dark. 'Stops by request', we stop in Two Horses for an age, then jump and blur the Caustic Marches, Pyres.

'I'll just retrace my steps,' I say. 'Later I'll make this trip.'

I leave him, ask a woman as she goes home, 'Did a girl, maybe she's in crisis, looking for work, disappear in there where you both live?'

'We're all called women now, not girls. Why do you care? Some kind of molestation? Morbid tricks?'

'Time on my hands. In this place, if you don't speak the language well, the cops will pick you up for loitering, you have to say in dialect, "Fuck off, and on your pony, guy," and then you're safe.'

She says, ‘We’ve all got crises here.’

I give her my friend’s name: ‘He’s done some beastly things. A dance of death.’

She wore her crisis like a shawl. ‘You’ll have to wait,’ she says.

‘Absolutely not – I have to find my friends, and then this girl, this woman . . .’

‘Maybe their house has been demolished. Or rebuilt. Elsewhere.’

‘It all seems a bit secret.’

Why don’t I take the 80 back, and start again? It’s all portentous, comes from only living once – I’ll ask the trainman, but don’t want to leave, I’m in this bar beneath the block where that girl disappeared, the district dull, deserted now but surely populous, the guys all doing who knows what, their ladies cooking, maybe on the phone . . . My documents are with my friend, the numbers, all the stuff you need to navigate, find where you are.



Medusa

‘Don’t wait for me,’ the girl had said, no other choice, but now the bar is closing, maybe a funeral that’s passing, maybe the current’s off, no games or neon, coffee on the blink . . . And what the fuck’s her name? Try pushing all the bells, each one with two, three, surnames, – here starts harassment or abuse, so stop. Locked out and at a loss. At once you’re just a stack of bones with dodgy flesh, exams all fudged or bought, your life a stack of Martian whispers.

 Trouble, and cop asks, ‘Who are you?’

 Dammit, I know; I wish I didn’t, wasn’t here, some murder, suicide or other mystery. ‘Oh no, I didn’t know her,’ into the slammer with him, no documents, prevaricator, molester even, don’t know fuck about him! Nice feeling, found out and shameless; scary too, the devil made me see the world – a precious experience – but in the end, Satan is not behind me – stands there, in a cone of light.

 Down the devilman!



Well, all is resolved, and here's my friend, the woman's traced as well, will pass into history soon. I tell him, 'I'm tired of all this humanitarian stuff.'

Smoke from fires of sticks comes faintly to us, like a morning-after smell of ciggies in cheap hotels.

'Tired of cutting deals with monsters from the battlefields,' I say, 'buying, selling packs of dead and wounded, our dead souls . . . tired of guys disposing, going on TV, morality and ethics – "these guys we kill and those we save", "this dam we build and that we breach". At least the monsters have a grievance, or a need – and they are being hunted. Then, there's all the religious crap . . .'

My friend now waggles his turbaned head, disclaiming routes to God's intelligence. 'Don't blame me,' he says. 'I just protect my guys, I didn't start all this.'

He goes on, 'You're so gloomy.'

'No, not at all. It's always been much worse.'

'Well, that should cheer you up – it's just some guys go down, we pick them up, is all,'

'That's it,' I say. 'And there's no hell, it's been

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retired. Maybe heaven too . . .’

He says, ‘You need to ask the pope, he specialises. Progressive creeds like ours – they don’t have all these fables . . .’

‘Go to the root.’

‘Exactly. Besides, in democracies some things aren’t even asked. Do you prefer pants or gowns? These things just come about, pedalling your bike in gowns is tough, besides, pants is cheaper, don’t make you look an idiot.’

‘I see how this extends to lots of things. Don’t ask. Good or bad, applied to people.’

‘Too right. Of course, we’d all vote to be rich and powerful – but that’s the one thing you can’t do, it seems. You just hold back, and wait.’ And he goes on, ‘Though someone’s got to have them, big bucks and such – you just enjoy and shop a little, have someone to do the work at home.’

Chew some coca. Helps running up and down the peaks – helps also on the plains, and in your car – it’s an identity, so fuck you if the culture isn’t yours.

We talk some more about catastrophe, the

climate stuff, and how we seem to kill the friend beneath our feet.

‘This earth, air, water, fire,’ I say, ‘this stuff, this nature. Friend or foe, indifferent, now it kills us, maybe it’s our fault? I’m not equipped to handle it. I deal with people, proximately – how do I know how many types of frogs it takes to make us happy?’

‘Frogs is quite low down, they say.’

‘So’s some humans, but I can’t say that.’

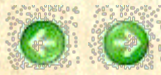
‘But you do,’ he says.

‘Let people take it as a kind of threat. You can’t threaten frogs, though.’

He says, ‘You can’t make people form fours and tell them that they’re free.’

‘Stalemate forever, then. Or patching, creatively,’ I say. ‘I expect they had to patch the ark – inventing new techniques ...’

‘And yet the fish were quite at home. There’s a design – at least for fish.’



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